



# Narratology in the Press

Sylvie Patron

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# Narratology in the Press

SYLVIE PATRON  
*University of Paris Diderot*

This paper deals with the results of an investigation into the use of the terms *narrateur*, *narratrice* ("narrator", male and female) and their derivatives, in the book reviews published in "Le Monde des livres", the literary supplement of the French newspaper *Le Monde*, between Friday, September 6, 2013, and Friday, August 29, 2014.

The paper is made up of three parts. The first part presents the quantitative and qualitative results of the investigation. The second contextualises these results, connecting them to the problem of the narrator in narrative theory (the debate between pan-narrator theories and optional-narrator theories). It establishes a standard model for the use of the terms *narrateur* and *narratrice*, and analyses some problematic occurrences. The third part interprets these results, in other words, makes connections between the analysis of the results, the contextualising problem and the field in which the research was carried out.

The aim of the paper is to raise considerations about the contradictions attached to the use of the term and concept of the narrator in journalistic criticism and as a result the contradictions of the prevailing theory (pan-narrator theory) which inspired it.

## 1. Quantitative and qualitative results

1.1. The corpus is made up of 47 "Le Monde des livres" supplements, appearing in the Friday edition of the newspaper (except during July and August). Each supplement is four to twelve pages long. In addition to these supplements are the two pages called "Les Livres de l'été" ("Summer books"), which replace the supplement in the Friday, July 31, and Friday August 8, 2014 editions.

There are 200 occurrences in this corpus of the term *narrateur* and 45 occurrences of the term *narratrice*. There are no occurrences of the terms *narrataire* (narratee) or *narratorial* (narrational).

Note: The count had to be done manually by going through the supplements and pages under consideration. According to the head of electronic documentation at Paris Diderot University: "the PDF format is only available for the last 30 issues". "Previous issues can be consulted in HTML format, but it is not possible to download and store them". Finally, "the newspaper's search engine is not very effective and does not allow, for example, searches by date" (Natacha Leclercq-Varlan to Sylvie Patron, October 15, 2014).

1.2. The 245 occurrences under consideration (200 occurrences of the term *narrateur*, 45 occurrences of the term *narratrice*) all appear in the "Literature" pages of "Le Monde des livres". There was no occurrence of these terms found on the pages dedicated to essays.

The occurrences of the words *narrateur* and *narratrice* are distributed in the following way:

- 4 occurrences in the editorials by Jean Birnbaum, editor of "Le Monde des livres";
- 6 occurrences in the personal portraits in the "Rencontre" ("Encounter") section, featured on the last page;
- 19 occurrences in the regular columns;
- 48 occurrences in the dossiers (double-page spreads on a particular theme);
- 57 occurrences in what I call "notes", short articles appearing in the sections "Sans oublier" ("Not forgetting"), "Sélection" ("Selection"), "Les choix du 'Monde des livres'" ("The choices of 'Le Monde des livres'"), etc., or attached to the "Traversée" ("Cross-section") and "Rencontre" pages;
- 112 occurrences in the articles devoted to novels or short story collections.

<b>Editorials</b> by Jean Birnbaum (front page)	<b>4</b>
<b>Portraits</b> in the “Rencontre” section (last page)	<b>6</b>
<b>Columns:</b>	<b>19</b>
— “Le feuilleton” (“The feuilleton”) by Éric Chevillard	13
— “Premier roman” (“First novel”) by Antoine Compagnon	3
— “L’image dans le texte” (“The image in the text”) by Catherine Millet	2
— “Vu des cuisines” (“Seen from the kitchens”) by Patrick Rambaud	1
<b>Dossiers:</b>	<b>48</b>
— “Traversée” or “Grande traversée” (“Major Cross-section”) section	26
— “Dossier” section	22
<b>Notes:</b> in the “Sans oublier”, “Sélection”, “Les choix du ‘Monde des livres’”, “Dans les poches” (“Paperbacks”), “Mon poche de chevet” (“Bedside paperback”), “C’est d’actualité” (“Happening now”) sections, and on the “Traversée”, “Grande traversée” and “Rencontre” pages	<b>57</b>
<b>Articles</b> dedicated to novels or short story collections	<b>111</b>
on front page articles included in the above	9

Special instances: 13 occurrences of *narrateur*, with or without capitalisation, to refer to the Proustian narrator.

### 1.3. The words *narrateur* and *narratrice* are sometimes replaced by synonyms or circumlocutions.

[...] *Rebecca raconte à la première personne une vie de souffrance et d'exclusion* [...].

[...] Rebecca narrates a life of suffering and exclusion in the first-person [...].

(“Le Monde des livres”, *Le Monde* supplement no. 21347,  
Friday, September 6, 2013, p. 5)

*Et une fois le livre terminé, la voix rêche et révoltée de Béatrice résonne longtemps dans la mémoire du lecteur.*

And once the book is finished, the harsh and rebellious voice of Béatrice resonates for a long time in the reader's memory.

(*Ibid.*)

*La narration est confiée alternativement à celle-ci et à celui-là.*

The narration is alternately assigned to one and the other.

(“Le Monde des livres”, *Le Monde* supplement no. 21521,  
Friday, March 28, 2014, p. 8)

[...] *l'auteur a choisi un double fictif, Franck, et un trajet criminel qui n'est pas le sien, afin d'élever ce récit au rang des meilleurs romans noirs.*

[...] the author has chosen a fictional double, Franck, and a criminal path that is not his own, in order to elevate this narrative to the rank of the best noir novels.

(“Le Monde des livres”, *Le Monde* supplement no. 21562,  
Friday, May 16, 2014, p. 11)

*Claude Pujade-Renaud prend la voix de Louise Victoire Jenamy, cette jeune musicienne aveugle* [...].

Claude Pujade-Renaud takes the voice of Louise Victoire Jenamy, this young blind musician [...]

(“Le Monde des livres”, *Le Monde* supplement no. 21574,  
Friday, May 30, 2014)

*Dès le départ, l'évidence s'impose à Madeleine Miller: elle racontera l'histoire d'amour entre Patrocle et Achille par la voix du premier.*

It was obvious to Madeleine Miller from the start: she would recount the love story between Patroclus and Achilles using the voice of the former.

(“Le Monde des livres”, *Le Monde* supplement no. 21598,  
Friday, June 27, 2014, p. 6)

## 2. Contextualisation (the debate between pan-narrator theories and optional-narrator theories)

### 2.1. Review of the debate

*Pan-narrator theories:* For these theories, the presence of a fictional narrator, whether overt or covert, is constitutive of the definition of fictional narrative. “There is always a fictional narrator in all fictional narratives.” “There is no narrative without a narrator.” “The narrator is either homodiegetic or heterodiegetic” (present or absent as a character in the story he/she tells).

*Optional narrator theories:* They challenge pan-narrator theories and favour optionalism, i.e. the argument for the optional nature of the narrator in the theory and analysis of fictional narrative. “There is a fictional narrator in some fictional narratives.” “There are narratives without a narrator.”

Note: the optional-narrator theorists are not clear as to the status and place of the traditional concept of the narrator (i.e. the narrator of the first-person narrative) in their model.

[...] only in cases where the narrative poet actually does ‘create’ a narrator, namely the first-person narrator of the first-person narrative, can one speak of the latter as a (fictive) narrator.

(Hamburger 1973, 1973 [1968]: 140;  
see also Banfield 1978: 297 and 1982: 185)

In this quotation, “narrator” designates the narrator of the first-person narrative.

[...] there is a narrator if we have good reasons to postulate a narrator. [...] we have good reasons to do this if a text explicitly or implicitly authorizes us to imagine that the story is told by a narrator.

(Köppe and Stühling 2011: 73)

In this quotation, “narrator” does not only designate the narrator of the first-person narrative.

In the traditional conception, the “first-person novel” precisely corresponds to the “homodiegetic novel”, which is to say a novel in which a character tells his or her own story (or a story in which he or she has participated in as a witness).

2.2. In the corpus under consideration, 239 out of the 245 occurrences refer to novels or collections of short stories told in the first person.

We can establish a standard model for the use of the terms *narrateur* and *narratrice*:

1) The male or female narrator is always or almost always *named*.

[...] *Laura Kern, héroïne et narratrice de l’envoûtant Lady Hunt* [...].

[...] Laura Kern, heroine and narrator of the captivating *Lady Hunt* [...].

(“Le Monde des livres”, *Le Monde* supplement no. 21359,  
Friday, September 20, 2013, p. 5)

*Jean Deichel, le narrateur de ce roman* [...].

Jean Deichel, the narrator of this novel [...].

(“Le Monde des livres”, *Le Monde* supplement no. 21365,  
Friday, September 27, 2013, p. 10)

*La narratrice d’Après l’amour – appelons-la ‘Divine’, pseudo qu’elle s’est choisi sur le site de rencontres lesbiennes qu’elle hante, et nom de guerre qui rappelle Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* [...].

The narrator of *Après l’amour* – let’s call her ‘Divine’, the pseudonym she gives herself on the lesbian dating site she haunts, and a *nom de guerre* reminiscent of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* [...].

(“Le Monde des livres”, *Le Monde* supplement no. 21365,  
Friday, September 27, 2013, p. 8)

*Le narrateur, un gamin prénommé Nicolas* [...].

The narrator, a kid called Nicolas [...].

(“Le Monde des livres”, *Le Monde* supplement no. 21586,  
Friday, June 13, 2014, p. 4)

Special instances: anonymous narrators (narrators whose name is not revealed to the reader).

[...] *ce narrateur — un homme d’environ 35 ans dont on ne saura jamais le nom* [...].

[...] this narrator — a man about 35 years old whose name we never find out [...].

(“Le Monde des livres”, *Le Monde* supplement no. 21383,  
Friday, October 18, 2013, p. 4)

[...] le narrateur est lui aussi un homme de l'ombre: on ne connaît d'ailleurs même pas son nom.

[...] the narrator is also a shadowy figure: we don't even know his name in fact.

("Le Monde des livres", *Le Monde* supplement no. 21443,  
Friday, December 27, 2013, p. 4)

À l'image de la Laurel de Ron Rash, le narrateur, qui n'est jamais nommé [...].

Like Ron Rash's Laurel, the narrator, who is never named [...].

("Le Monde des livres", *Le Monde* supplement no. 21503,  
Friday, March 7, 2014, p. 3)

Le point commun entre *Snobs* et *Passé imparfait* ? Un narrateur artiste dont on ignore le nom [...].

What do *Snobs* and *Passé imparfait* have in common? An artist narrator whose name we don't know [...].

("Le Monde des livres", *Le Monde* supplement no. 21592,  
Friday, June 20, 2014, p. 10)

2) The narrator is *characterised* according to profession, age, personal history, and so on (gender being specified by the terms *narrateur* and *narratrice* or by proper names).

Son narrateur, journaliste employé par un quotidien de droite [...].

Its narrator, a journalist working for a right-wing newspaper [...].

("Le Monde des livres", *Le Monde* supplement no. 21347,  
Friday, September 6, 2013, p. 1)

[...] le narrateur, Dell Parsons, professeur désormais à la veille de la retraite [...].

[...] the narrator, Dell Parsons, a teacher now on the eve of retirement [...].

("Le Monde des livres", *Le Monde* supplement no. 21353,  
Friday, September 13, 2013, p. 1)

[...] le narrateur, un fonctionnaire espagnol venu participer à la Conférence internationale des poids et mesures en tant que membre de la commission kilo.

[...] the narrator, a Spanish public servant who has come to take part in the International Conference of Weights and Measures as a member of the kilo committee.

(*Ibid.*, p. 12)

Son narrateur est ce qu'on appelle un libraire d'ancien.

Its narrator is what's called an antiquarian bookseller.

("Le Monde des livres", *Le Monde* supplement no. 21389,  
Friday, October 25, 2013, p. 1)

La narratrice du roman n'est pas soldate et elle côtoie, à strictement parler, peu de militaires.

The narrator of the novel is not a soldier and she doesn't, strictly speaking, mix with many military personnel.

("Le Monde des livres", *Le Monde* supplement no. 21407,  
Friday, November 15, 2013, p. 2)

Le narrateur de ce court roman, musicologue à l'université [...].

The narrator of this short novel, a university musicologist [...].

("Le Monde des livres", *Le Monde* supplement no. 21425,  
Friday, December 6, 2013, p. 5)

Son narrateur, Richard, aura bientôt 18 ans, mais sait qu'il n'atteindra jamais les 19: il est en soins palliatifs.

Its narrator, Richard, will soon be 18, but knows that he will never reach 19: he is in palliative care.

("Le Monde des livres", *Le Monde* supplement no. 21509,  
Friday, March 14, 2014, p. 3)

[...] Rukshana, la narratrice, une jeune journaliste qui fait partie de l'équipe féminine de son université, en Inde.

[...] Rukshana, the narrator, a young journalist who is part of the female team of her university, in India.

("Le Monde des livres", *Le Monde* supplement no. 21592,  
Friday, June 20, 2014, p. 5)

Le narrateur est un illustrateur, installé dans l'est des Pays-Bas, hanté par des images vieilles de trente ans.

The narrator is an illustrator, living in the eastern part of the Netherlands, haunted by images that are thirty years old."

("Le Monde des livres", *Le Monde* supplement no. 21604,  
Friday, July 4, 2014, p. 4)

A counter-example:

*On ne sait rien du narrateur sinon qu'il est chez lui lorsqu'il entend des pas sur le gravier.*

We know nothing about the narrator except that he is at home when he hears footsteps on the gravel.

(“Le Monde des livres”, *Le Monde* supplement no. 21586,  
Friday, June 13, 2014, p. 3)

3) The narrator belongs to the same fictional world as the other characters, which is signalled by generational considerations, for example.

*Une narratrice, à qui sa famille reproche “de vivre dans le passé”, se souvient des trois amies, fréquentées séparément à l’orée de l’âge adulte, qui ont fait d’elle ce qu’elle est. [...] Leurs histoires individuelles, puis leurs rencontres avec la narratrice, vont permettre à celle-ci de se former et de se définir, et au livre d’accéder à sa dimension générationnelle.*

A narrator, reproached by her family for “living in the past”, remembers three friends who she knew separately on the cusp of adulthood and who made her who she is. [...] Their individual stories and then their encounters with the narrator allow her to shape and define herself, and the book to take on a generational dimension.

(“Le Monde des livres”, *Le Monde* supplement no. 21359,  
Friday, September 20, 2013, p. 3)

*Ils appartiennent, comme Eddy le narrateur, “au monde de ces enfants qui regardent la télévision le matin au réveil”, s’ennuient à l’école, jouent au football et “passent des heures dans les rues, le soir et la nuit, à zoner”.*

They belong, like Eddy the narrator, “to the world of those children who watch television in the morning on waking”, are bored at school, play football and “spend hours in the streets in the evening and at night, just hanging around”.

(“Le Monde des livres”, *Le Monde* supplement no. 21461,  
Friday, January 17, 2014, p. 7)

Special instance: in Kamel Daoud’s novel *Meursault, contre-enquête*, the narrator is the brother of a character in another, very famous, novel, Camus’ *L’Étranger*.

*Que faisait-il [l’Arabe] ce jour-là, allongé sur le sable, lorsque Meursault a croisé son chemin ? Son frère cadet, le narrateur de Meursault, contre-enquête, l’ignore, malgré ses tentatives de reconstitution.*

What was he [the Arab] doing that day, lying on the sand, when Meursault crossed his path? His younger brother, the narrator of *Meursault, contre-enquête*, doesn’t know, despite his attempts to put the pieces together.

(“Le Monde des livres”, *Le Monde* supplement no. 21598,  
Friday, June 27, 2014, p. 1)

4) Sometimes there are comments on the difference between the “experiencing I” and the “narrating I”.

*Entrecroisant la parole crue, sans concession, brutale de l’adolescente et le regard rétrospectif, plus distancié, d’une narratrice adulte, Emmanuelle Richard saisit avec une étonnante justesse la sauvagerie de cet âge à vif.*

Intertwining the rough, uncompromising, brutal voice of the adolescent girl and the more distanced, retrospective view of an adult narrator, Emmanuelle Richard captures the anti-social nature of this raw age with an amazing accuracy.

(“Le Monde des livres”, *Le Monde* supplement no. 21509,  
Friday, March 14, 2014, p. 2)

*Dans l’Argentine des années 1970 commence l’histoire que le narrateur se force à retrouver [...].*

The story that the narrator forces himself to unearth begins in the Argentina of the 1970s [...].

(“Le Monde des livres”, *Le Monde* supplement no. 21521,  
Friday, March 28, 2014, p. 5)

5) There are often comments on the relationship between the male or female narrator and the male or female author of the novel.

The male or female narrator and author are generally differentiated by their names.

*Enzo, le narrateur de Borgestein, l’un des deux romans de Sergio Bizzio qui viennent de paraître en français [...].*

Enzo, the narrator of *Borgestein*, one of the two novels by Sergio Bizzio that have just been published in French [...].

(“Le Monde des livres”, *Le Monde* supplement no. 21515,  
Friday, March 21, 2014, p. 4)

## Counter-examples:

*Pourquoi le narrateur d'Un autre (titre tourné déjà comme un aveu), qui répond au même nom que l'auteur, préfère-t-il se faire appeler Alain Fayer ?*

Why does the narrator of *Un autre* (a title that already has the air of an admission), who answers to the same name as the author, prefer to be called Alain Fayer?

("Le Monde des livres", *Le Monde* supplement no. 21503, Friday, March 7, 2014, p. 8)

*Le narrateur, Eduardo Halfon, a beau avoir le patronyme de l'auteur, il ne s'agit pas d'autofiction [...].*

Though the narrator, Eduardo Halfon, may well share a surname with the author, this is not an autobiographical novel [...].

("Le Monde des livres", *Le Monde* supplement no. 21491, Friday, February 21, 2014, p. 5)

*En effet, le narrateur porte son nom [...].*

Indeed, the narrator bears his name [...].

("Le Monde des livres", *Le Monde* supplement no. 21539, Friday, April 18, 2014, p. 4)

They are distinguished by other features, sometimes unexpected ones.

*David di Nota, naguère danseur à l'Opéra, épouse ici les pas d'un imbécile standard.*

David di Nota, who used to be a dancer at the Opéra, here follows the steps of a common idiot.

("Le Monde des livres", *Le Monde* supplement no. 21347, Friday, September 6, 2013, p. 1)

*Jeune romancière née en 1989, Antonia Kerr choisit pour la deuxième fois un narrateur assez inattendu: un homme vieillissant.*

A young novelist born in 1989, Antonia Kerr chooses for the second time a rather unexpected narrator: an aging man.

(*Ibid.*, p. 4)

*Le jeune "payo" (non-gitan) est un narrateur idéal, suffisamment à distance pour permettre au romancier d'échapper au sentiment d'imposture qui le guette.*

The young "payo" (non-gypsy) is an ideal narrator, sufficiently removed for the novelist to escape the nagging feeling he has of being an impostor.

("Le Monde des livres", *Le Monde* supplement no. 21371, Friday, October 4, 2013, p. 6)

One of Éric Chevillard's columns, "Le roman de la mascotte", on *Poupée* by Alain Sevestre, is totally devoted to this theme.

Often the novelist complains of being confused with his narrator on the pretext that the narrator expresses himself in the first person, using his own fountain pen, what's more. "*But I have nothing to do with this pretentious loser!*", he boasts, flicking his glasses back on his nose with his index finger, just as his character also does when annoyed. In other words, the reader can be excused. As can the novelist, who isn't always aware of the resemblance or thinks he has good reasons to deny it, like the father of three girls with moustaches who questions his paternity when he shaves his own off.

What can be done to dispel this illusion that is the source of so many misunderstandings? The writer sometimes thinks the solution is to boldly assign the narration of the story to a character of the opposite sex. A crude trick that fools no one, transvestism being one of the most common textual practices in literature. And there is always a moment when the frail Isolde betrays herself by running 100 metres in less than ten seconds and the imposture is exposed for all to see. It's clear something else has to be devised.

"*She speaks to me. She makes me speak. What can I answer? When they'll know who I am!*" exclaims, 60 pages in, Scott, the narrator of Alain Sevestre's new novel, *Poupée*. Since the revelation comes without delay, I can spill the beans: Scott is not a dog. And the puzzle of this identity, posed from the outset, represents a disturbance at the heart of the narrative, which grows with the suspense introduced from the second chapter [...].

("Le Monde des livres", *Le Monde* supplement no. 21491, Friday, 21 February 2014)

(We learn later that Scott, the narrator of *Poupée*, is a lion, and later still, a stuffed toy lion.)

We can also note that much of the effort of the journalist critics consists in identifying resemblances between the narrator and the male or female author of the novel.

*La narratrice, double maladroit de la romancière et amie d'une certaine "Gaëlle" – trois poupées gigognes [...].*

The narrator, a clumsy double of the novelist and friend of a certain "Gaëlle" – three Russian dolls [...].

("Le Monde des livres", *Le Monde* supplement no. 21401,  
Friday, November 8, 2013, p. 9)

*Il y a toujours un vélo, chez Lionel Duroy. Un vélo sur lequel son narrateur, qui lui ressemble comme un frère, quel que soit le masque qu'il emprunte, pédale en rond [...].*

There is always a bike in Lionel Duroy's novels. A bike on which the narrator, who resembles him like a brother, whatever mask he uses, rides round in circles [...].

("Le Monde des livres", *Le Monde* supplement no. 21437,  
Friday, December 20, 2013, p. 2)

*Une fresque lucide et drôle des Années folles, qui balade le narrateur, alter ego à peine caché de l'auteur dans une succession d'aventures mondaines et littéraires entre Paris et Nice.*

A lucid and funny panorama of the Roaring Twenties, which carries the narrator, the barely disguised alter ego of the author, into a series of high society and literary adventures between Paris and Nice.

("Le Monde des livres", *Le Monde* supplement no. 21443,  
Friday, December 27, 2013, p. 4)

*Brizuela, qui avait 13 ans en 1976, a sans doute mis beaucoup de lui dans la figure de Bazán [...].*

Brizuela, who was 13 in 1976, has no doubt put a lot of himself into the figure of Bazán [...].

("Le Monde des livres", *Le Monde* supplement no. 21449,  
Friday, January 3, 2014, p. 5)

*Difficile de ne pas voir dans Hobbie une image de Donna Tartt elle-même [...].*

It's difficult not to see an image of Donna Tartt herself in Hobbie [...].

("Le Monde des livres", *Le Monde* supplement no. 21455,  
Friday, January 10, 2014, p. 1)

*En quoi le héros et narrateur de La Fille de mon meilleur ami évoque un peu son auteur, Yves Ravey, roi du bonneteau littéraire, qui excelle à attirer le lecteur vers de fausses pistes.*

In this respect the hero and narrator of *La Fille de mon meilleur ami* is somewhat reminiscent of its author, Yves Ravey, a master of the literary shell game who excels at leading the reader down the wrong path.

("Le Monde des livres", *Le Monde* supplement no. 21503,  
Friday, March 7, 2014, p. 4)

*Double romanesque de l'écrivain, Colson Whitehead, Ben regarde avec autant de crainte que d'impatience s'éloigner les rivages de l'enfance.*

A literary double of the writer, Colson Whitehead, Ben watches the shores of childhood recede into the distance with as much fear as impatience.

("Le Monde des livres", *Le Monde* supplement no. 21509,  
Friday, March 14, 2014, p. 2)

*Ces deux narrateurs pris dans les embarras de la fiction sont bien évidemment des figures de l'auteur lui-même, Sergi Pàmies au travail [...].*

These two narrators caught up in the predicaments of the story are obviously versions of the author himself, Sergi Pàmies, at work [...].

("Le Monde des livres", *Le Monde* supplement no. 21533,  
Friday, April 11, 2014, p. 8)

*À la fin de ses études, le narrateur, qui ressemble fort à l'auteur, Écossais émigré aux États-Unis, se trouva fort dépourvu.*

At the end of his studies, the narrator, who bears a strong resemblance to the author, a Scot who emigrated to the United States, found himself sorely deprived.

("Le Monde des livres", *Le Monde* supplement no. 21550,  
Friday, May 2, 2014, p. 9)

This standard model is found in all the different types of articles in the corpus: editorials, columns, notes, and so on. It is also reinforced by the examples where the words *narrateur* and *narratrice* are replaced by synonyms or circumlocutions.

On the edges of this model, we can identify seven problematic occurrences. The first three involve narratives that can't immediately be described as novels. First example:



*Le passé nous est généralement mieux connu que l'avenir [...]. Or [...] ce principe ne se vérifie pas toujours. Ainsi, en dépit de nombreuses hypothèses vraisemblables, nous ignorons encore aujourd'hui ce qui a entraîné la disparition des dinosaures alors que nous savons qu'une catastrophe nucléaire sera la cause de la nôtre. L'absence de suspense apparaîtrait même comme rédhitoire si l'aventure humaine était l'œuvre d'un narrateur qui nous la livrerait par épisodes et je vous prie de croire que je serais sans pitié pour lui dans ma chronique.*

We generally know more about the past than the future [...]. But [...] this principle doesn't always apply. Thus, despite numerous plausible hypotheses, we still don't know today what led to the disappearance of the dinosaurs, whereas we know that a nuclear catastrophe will be the cause of our own. This lack of suspense would be ruinous in fact if the story of the human race were the work of a narrator who gave it to us in serial instalments and I can assure you that I would be merciless to him in my column.

("Le Monde des livres", *Le Monde* supplement no. 21353, Friday, September 13, 2013, p. 12)

The use of the term *narrator* here is explained by its use immediately afterwards to refer to the narrator of Javier Sebastián's *Cycliste de Tchernobyl*, which follows the standard model:

*Mais Javier Sebastián n'ouvre pas son roman sur le récit de la catastrophe. Tout commence vingt-cinq ans plus tard dans un self-service des Champs-Élysées où se trouve présent le narrateur, un fonctionnaire espagnol venu participer à la Conférence internationale des poids et mesures en tant que membre de la commission kilo.*

But Javier Sebastián doesn't open his novel with the story of the catastrophe. Everything begins twenty-five years later in a self-service restaurant on the Champs-Élysées, where the narrator, a Spanish public servant who has come to attend the International Conference of Weights and Measures as a member of the kilo committee, finds himself.

(*Ibid.*)

Other examples:

*C'est pour varier les points de vue que la description passe de temps en temps du 'je' au 'il' et que parfois, même, le narrateur se féminise.*

To vary the point of view, the description moves from 'I' to 'he' from time to time, and sometimes the narrator even becomes female.

("Le Monde des livres", *Le Monde* supplement no. 21359, Friday, September 20, 2013, p. 12)

*Une quête d'identité qui n'est pas seulement celle du narrateur, mais celle de l'Europe tout entière.*

A quest for identity that is not only that of the narrator, but of Europe as a whole.

("Le Monde des livres", *Le Monde* supplement no. 21467, Friday, January 24, 2014, p. 4)

The use of the term *narrator* here is explained by the fact that the narratives in question, *Intérieurs* by Thomas Clerc and *Double exil* by Yannis Kiourtsakis, lie on the border between autobiography and novel.

The four other problematic occurrences involve novels or collections of short stories which are not narrated in the first person.

*"David ne se souvenait pas d'avoir jamais eu honte d'elle", précise le narrateur.*

"David didn't remember ever being ashamed of her", the narrator adds.

("Le Monde des livres", *Le Monde* supplement no. 21395, Friday, November 1, 2013, p. 7 – about *Les Complémentaires* by Jens Christian Grøndahl)

*Dans ces nouvelles, tout passe par le regard (des personnages), comme si l'œil s'exposait à la maladie du quotidien et de l'égarement. Parfois ce regard (celui du narrateur aussi) est appuyé, parfois non, comme pour les quatre couples d'"Une heure dans l'histoire de l'amour" à différents âges de leur attachement.*

In these short stories, everything happens via the gaze (of the characters), as though the eye were exposed to the disease of distraction and the everyday. Sometimes this gaze (that of the narrator as well) is focused, sometimes not, as for the four couples of "Une heure dans l'histoire de l'amour" at different stages of their relationship.

("Le Monde des livres", *Le Monde* supplement no. 21401, Friday, November 8, 2013, p. 5 – about *Quelque chose est là dehors et autres nouvelles* by Richard Bausch)

*Je voulais un roman collectif, une petite Comédie humaine: réunir un groupe et étudier ses comportements. Pour cela, j'avais besoin d'un narrateur omniscient, et je n'ai pas pu faire autrement que de m'éloigner du point de vue et des sentiments des personnages.*

I wanted a collective novel, a little *Comédie humaine*: to bring together a group and study its behaviour. For that, I needed an omniscient narrator and my only option was to distance myself from the point of view and feelings of the characters.

("Le Monde des livres", *Le Monde* supplement no. 21467, Friday, January 24, 2014, p. 10 – about *Le Village évanoui* by Bernard Quiriny [quote from the author]).

*La voix taquine de son narrateur omniscient explorant avec finesse l'intimité des personnages s'entremêle aux fragilités grinçantes de Gary, enfin prêt à retourner sur les traces de son passé.*

The teasing voice of its omniscient narrator, skilfully exploring the inner lives of the characters, becomes entwined with the darkly humorous frailties of Gary, finally ready to go back over the traces of his past.

(“Le Monde des livres”, *Le Monde* supplement no. 21545, Friday, April 25, 2014, p. 4 – about *Gary tout seul* by Sophie Simon)

### 3. Interpretation

We have seen that 239 out of the 245 occurrences refer to novels or collections of short stories told in the first person, which is to say 97.5 %. This figure is not at all reflective of the percentage of novels told in the first person in relation to novels told in the third person, which is approximately 28%.

In other words:

— in the case of novels told in the first person, we find the terms *narrateur* or *narratrice*, or their synonyms, almost automatically;

— in the case of the novels told in the third person, we only find the term *narrateur* in exceptional cases (and never the term *narratrice*).

This observation runs counter to the claims of pan-narrator theory – “There is always a fictional narrator in all fictional narratives”, “The narrator is either homodiegetic or heterodiegetic”, etc. – and supports rather the theory of the optional narrator.

We can add that the only article that reflects on the question of the narrator in any way, “Le roman de la mascotte” by Éric Chevillard, on *Poupée* by Alain Sevestre, concerns a novel told in the first person.

In the four instances where the term *narrator* is used to refer to novels or collections of short stories told in the third person:

- 1) the narrator is not *named*;
- 2) the narrator is not *characterised* in any way;
- 3) there is nothing that allows us to say that the narrator belongs to the same fictional world as the characters; on the contrary (the case of the narrator described as “omniscient”):

I wanted a collective novel, a little *Comédie humaine*: to bring together a group and study its behaviour. For that, I needed an omniscient narrator and my only option was to distance myself from the point of view and feelings of the characters.

The teasing voice of its omniscient narrator, skilfully exploring the inner lives of the characters, becomes entwined with the darkly humorous frailties of Gary, finally ready to go back over the traces of his past.

These examples reflect the contradictions of the pan-narrator theory, which simultaneously asserts the presence of a fictional narrator in all fictional narratives and doesn’t allow this narrator to be part of the same fictional world as the characters in the case of “omniscient” narration, in other words the narration that offers direct access to the thoughts and feelings of the characters.

4) there are also never any comments concerning the opposition between the “experiencing I” and the “narrating I”;

5) nor any comments concerning the relationship between the male or female narrator and author of the novel – except perhaps, very discreetly, in the quote from Bernard Quiriny:

*Pour cela, j’avais besoin d’un narrateur omniscient [...].*

For that, I needed an omniscient narrator [...].

Which is to say: the narrator is not me.

What we can conclude from this review is that when it comes to this narrator (the narrator of certain novels or collections of short stories told in the third person), *there is nothing to say*. In two out of the four cases considered, the term *narrator* could moreover be replaced by the terms *narrative* or *narration*.

“David ne se souvenait pas d’avoir jamais eu honte d’elle”, *précise le récit*.

“David didn’t remember ever being ashamed of her”, the narrative adds.

*Je voulais un roman collectif, une petite Comédie humaine: réunir un groupe et étudier ses comportements. Pour cela, j'avais besoin d'une narration omnisciente, et je n'ai pas pu faire autrement que de m'éloigner du point de vue et des sentiments des personnages.*

I wanted a collective novel, a little *Comédie humaine*: to bring together a group and study its behaviour. For that, I needed an omniscient narration and my only option was to distance myself from the point of view and feelings of the characters.

There remains the two following examples:

In these short stories, everything happens via the gaze (of the characters), as if the eye were exposed to the disease of distraction and the everyday. Sometimes this gaze (that of the narrator as well) is focused, sometimes not, as for the four couples of 'Une heure dans l'histoire de l'amour' at different stages of their relationship.

The teasing voice of its omniscient narrator, skilfully exploring the inner lives of the characters, becomes entwined with the darkly humorous frailties of Gary, finally ready to go back over the traces of his past.

In these two examples, the narration is attributed to an anthropomorphic narrator, which rules out the possibility of replacing the term *narrator* with *narrative* or *narration*. We can nevertheless wonder whether the metaphor of the gaze of the narrator is appropriate to account for the narrative technique or more probably the descriptive technique used (the more or less focused "gaze" of the narrator probably referring to the more or less detailed nature of the narrative).

One final remark: the two examples, "David didn't remember ever being ashamed of her", the narrator adds" and "Sometimes this gaze (that of the narrator as well) is focused, sometimes not", and so on, are taken from articles by the same journalist, Nils C. Ahl. Ahl is also a writer and a translator. His educational background is the preparatory class at Lycée Honoré de Balzac, in Paris, and the University of Paris X-Nanterre. It is thus not surprising that he spontaneously resorts to the pan-narrator theory of fictional narrative, which is the dominant theory in these courses of instruction. The example "The teasing voice of its omniscient narrator", and so on, is taken from an article by Esther Attias, whose educational background is identical to Nils C. Ahl's (preparatory class at Lycée Fénelon in Paris, École Normale Supérieure at Cachan and University Paris Diderot in English).

I will finish with a final quote, taken from the editorial of "Le Monde des livres" dated October 25, 2013:

*"C'est fou comme on se fait vite des relations quand on n'est là pour personne", écrit-[Jean-Yves Lacroix]. Ouvrez Haute époque, pourtant, et vous comprendrez d'emblée qu'il y a quelqu'un. La voix d'un "libraire en chambre" qui connaît son métier.*

*"It's mad how quickly you develop relationships when you're not there for anyone", writes [Jean-Yves Lacroix]. Open up Haute époque, however and you immediately know someone is there. The voice of a "home-based bookseller" who knows his trade.*

("Le Monde des livres", *Le Monde* supplement no. 21389, Friday, October 25, 2013, p. 1)

"Someone is there" (and therefore there is something to say about him or her) or "No one is there" (and therefore there is no reason to talk about him or her): this could sum up this investigation into the use of the terms *narrateur* and *narratrice* in "Le Monde des livres", between Friday, September 6, 2013, and Friday, August 29, 2014. It shows the influence of the pan-narrator theory in the background of certain journalist critics, but also and above all what little critical utility this theory has, which ultimately justifies the claims of the optional-narrator theory.

*Translated by Melissa McMahon*

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